THE SUN NEVER SETS, THE SUN WAITS TO RISE

THE ENDURING STRUCTURAL LEGACIES OF EUROPEAN COLONIZATION

Chuka Ejeckam is the Director of Research and Policy at the BC Federation of Labour, and a Research Associate with the BC Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Between the late 1700s and the early 1800s, the British Empire's claimed territories spanned so much of the globe that it gave rise to a (perhaps apocryphal) proclamation; 'the sun never sets on the British Empire.'[1] The phrase is said to have represented that the expanse of imperial Britain was so vast that daylight touched some part of its lands at all times. However, if the phrase is considered temporally rather than geographically, it takes on another foreboding meaning.

In December of 2019, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights – located in Winnipeg – held an event entitled 'The forgotten stories: Nigeria-Biafra war and its genocide.'[2] The event came about through organizing and campaigning by members of the Umunna (Igbo) Cultural Association of Manitoba, an organization of Nigerian-Canadians living in Manitoba. The same month, Shell Oil sponsored a speech in Houston, Texas, inaugurating a lecture series on the 'Black Experience.' The speech was delivered by a lead author of the *New York Times*' acclaimed '1619 Project' discussing the enslavement of African people in the U.S.[3] Shell Oil is the U.S. subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell PLC, a British-Dutch oil and gas company incorporated in the U.K. and headquartered in the Netherlands. Just months prior to the speech, it was reported that two units of Royal Dutch Shell were fighting lawsuits filed against them in connection to a December 2011 40,000-barrel oil spill near the Bonga oil field in Nigeria, which affected at least 168,000 people in more than 350 communities.[4] The company's units argued that the case should be tried in Nigerians courts, rather than the U.K. courts in which the suits were filed.

Shell is directly implicated in mass pollution and ecological devastation in Nigeria.[5] As well, a 2017 report published by Amnesty International found that Shell was an active participant in human rights violations committed against Nigerians in the 1990s.[6] The report identifies that Shell knew of the ecological devastation that had come from its projects

1 Munroe, Randall. "Will the sun ever set on the British empire?" *The Guardian*. September 9, 2014.

2 Canadian Museum for Human Rights. "The forgotten stories: Nigeria-Biafra war and its genocide." humanrights.ca. Accessed December 2019.

3 Emancipation Park Conservancy. "Emancipation Conversations Lecture Series." emancipationparkconservancy.salsalabs.org. Accessed December 2019.

4 Milligan, Ellen. "Shell Units Fighting U.K. Lawsuit Over Nigerian Oil Spill." *Bloomberg*. October 8, 2019.

5 Roelofs, Portia. "The Nigerian Activist Whose Death Shamed Shell: An Interview with Roy Doron and Toyin Falola." *Jacobin*. November 10, 2019.; Austen, Trévon, and Bill Van Auken

6 Amnesty International. *A Criminal Enterprise? Shell's Involvement in Human Rights Violations in Nigeria In The 1990s.* 2017.

in the Niger Delta oil field, knew of human rights violations being committed against the Ogoni protesters which had halted Shell's oil extractions, and knew that soliciting the involvement of security forces would increase violence and the prevalence of human rights violations. Regardless, Shell called for armed forces to be deployed against the Ogoni peoples. A 2011 United Nations Environmental Programme report found that the land, air, and water of Ogoniland had been polluted, including groundwater contamination, and that essential agriculture and fisheries had been compromised.[7] In 1996, the African Commission for Human and People's Rights had found that the pollution and ecological degradation caused by Shell's sites in Ogoniland reached a point that was "humanly unacceptable, and [had] made living in the Ogoniland a nightmare." Shell's motives were evidently wholly profit-seeking; though the company portrayed the protests as exclusively an economic issue in public statements, internal documents revealed discussion of the company's inadequate, ageing, and leaking infrastructure.[8] At the time, Shell was the Nigerian government's business partner in its venture in the Niger Delta, and with oil exports comprising nearly 96% of the country's foreign revenues, it held a position of considerable leverage. The violent repression of the Ogoni peoples ultimately included the 1995 execution of nine Ogoni activists, including renowned author and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.[9]

Shell has had operations in Nigeria since 1937.[10] Its presence has wrought devastation in the country. During the 1967-1970 Nigeria-Biafra War – beginning seven years after Nigeria became independent of Britain – the U.K. supported the Nigerian government against the then-declared state of Biafra.[11] Citing John Young's work on the U.K. Labour government of 1964 – 1970, Karen Smith has written that the U.K.'s support for Nigeria during the war contained four primary motives; first, Shell-British Petroleum held major investments in Nigeria, and the country was the source of more than 10% of the U.K.'s oil imports; second, the U.K. government believed a successful Biafran secession could encourage similar efforts throughout the continent, bringing "chaos"; third, the U.K. government believed that a break-up of Nigeria could reduce British influence in West Africa, allowing France to gain further control; and fourth, the U.K. sought to challenge the Soviet Union's support for the Nigerian government, again for fear of losing influence.[12]

In an effort to validate its support for the Nigerian government – and in response to both the Biafran leadership's statements that Nigerian forces were regularly conducting mass slaughter of Igbo people, and to domestic concerns that the Nigeran government's declared 'final push' would constitute a genocide against Igbos – the U.K. government signaled that its support had become contingent upon the Nigerian state permitting an international observer team access to the country to investigate concerns about mass killings.[13] Though the observer team reported that the claims of genocide were unfounded, evidence surfaced that the team had gathered intelligence for the British government while in Nigeria – including assessing the Nigerian government's military needs – calling the veracity of the team's reports into question.[14]

From the above, it can be strongly argued – if not securely surmised – that the British government prioritized its own economic, imperial, and geopolitical interests over concerns about the grievous violence of the Nigeria-Biafra War. Three decades later, Shell – a company installed in Nigeria during the time of British colonial rule – goes even further, directly inciting violence in the Niger Delta in pursuit of profit and dominion. Two decades after that, Shell challenges that lawsuits charging malfeasance and misconduct in its operations in Nigeria can be heard at all in British courts.

This, I argue, is the sun never setting on the British Empire. Though the imperial Britain of the 19th century no longer exists, these events reveal the persistent stain of European colonization, the entrenchment of structural Eurocoloniality in the international system. The former colonial empires and slavers are not as they once were, but they have marred the world deeply and enduringly, and their former configurations are evident in the events, circumstances, and disparities of today – faintly in some ways, vividly in others. The United Nations Working Group on People of African Descent reported in 2016 that Black people in Canada face multifaceted barriers and discrimination, including racial profiling by law enforcement, aggressive transfer of Black children to child welfare agencies, disparities in access to education, and

7 Amnesty International, pg. 48

8 Amnesty International, pg. 6-7

9 Roelofs, Portia

10 Shell Nigeria, "Who We Are." shell.com.ng. Accessed December 2019.

11 Smith, Karen E. "The UK and 'genocide' in Biafra.' *Journal of Genocide Research, Vol. 16, Nos. 2-3, pg. 247-262*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. 2014.; pg. 250

12 Smith, Karen E., pg. 250

13 Smith, Karen E., 247

14 Smith, Karen E., 257

disproportionate levels of poverty and illness.[15] Black people in Canada are drastically overrepresented among incarcerated persons accounting for between 8 and 10% of the federal prison population despite comprising just 3.5% of the population overall.[16] The working group's statement highlighted "Canada's history of enslavement, racial segregation, and marginalization" as significant causes of the disparities it observed.[17] Though discussion of reparations for enslaved Africans has reached a degree of national prominence in the U.S., that conversation has been notably absent from Canadian political discourse.[18] However, it is a conversation that must be had; discussing justice and equity for people of African descent requires reckoning with a world-bestriding, Eurocolonial, and ultimately white supremacist system of subjugation, exploitation, extraction, and enslavement – a system upon which the present was built. And, though it has mutated, this system persists; In 2012, developing countries sent a full $2 trillion more to wealthy industrialized countries than they received – $3.3 trillion vs $1.3 trillion.[19]

In his 1972 reflection on the Nigeria-Biafra War, Arthur Nwankwo notes that "the liberation of black people is a world-wide imperative."[20] These words are no less true today.

15 UNHCR, Office of the High Commissioner. "Statement to the media by the United Nations' Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, on the conclusion of its official visit to Canada, 17-21 October 2016. UNHCR. October 21, 2016.

16 Policy Options. "Doing justice by Black Canadians." *Policy Options*. April 25, 2018.

17 UNHCR Office of the High Commissioner

18 Morgan, Anthony. "What's wrong with a cheque? A call for slavery reparations." *Ricochet*. March 21, 2019.

19 Hickel, Jason. "Aid in reverse: how poor countries develop rich countries."

20 Nwankwo, Arthur A. *Nigeria: The Challenge of Biafra*, pg. 80. Rex Collings Ltd. 1972.